

An outlier of Myanmar's early urban system: new archaeological discoveries at Letpanywa.

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Introduction.

All periods, cities, states or nations have something that has gone before. In Central Myanmar, the Pyu civilisation of the first millennium AD, with its extensive walled cities of Sriksetra, Beikthano, Halin and Maingmaw, which are well known to scholars (Stargardt 1990), must have come from smaller beginnings. We may not yet have found all the Pyu cities or Pyu sites. So we need study more of the protohistory or prehistory of Myanmar. Formerly, it was Myanmar people's understanding that the Pyu period went from the 1st century A.D. to about the end of the 9th century A.D. But Pyu can be seen as a name for a national people, not just a historical period. We can look for their origins in the Neolithic or Bronze Ages. Many archaeologists have studied the Pyu sites on the eastern side of the Ayeyarwady River. But we have now located and excavated a Pyu site on the western side of the Ayeyarwady that contained brick buildings and inhumation burials with grave goods. It is called Letpanywa (LPY). This paper is a summary of two departmental reports on the excavations that were written in Burmese (Nyein Lwin 2002, 2003).

Research Issues.

1. Some local farmers found bronze implements in an area known as Oakpho Kone (brick factory mound). So, we might ask whether this could be a Bronze Age site.
2. When we were exploring we found many fingermarked bricks, which all included rice husks. These are very similar to Pyu site bricks (Aung Myint & Moore 1991). So, this is a possible Pyu site. But what period, early or late? The rice husks in the bricks indicate that these people were growing rice.
3. When U Sein Win, the landowner of Oakpho Kone, was ploughing, he found iron implements, stone implements and many different kinds of beads. We can study these Pyu antiques and publish them.
4. These findings might help to fill in some blank areas of Myanmar prehistory or protohistory.

Location.

Letpanywa is 30 kilometres southwest of the old Pyu city of Beikthano, situated on the western site of the Ayeyarwady River near the Pye Daw Tha island, in Shinpaung We township, Thatyet district. The village of Letpanywa has a famous pagoda called the Mahapeinne. Our excavation site is 780 metres west of the village, at the map location E 95° 58.932' and N 19° 48.840'.

Background.

Letpanywa village is near the Letpanywa stream. Local legend says that when the Queen of Beikthano was fighting a war against king Duttabaung of Sriksetra she ran away, and crossed that stream, but then she became tired and surrendered. The valley

of the Letpanywa stream contains more archaeological ruins, beside the Letpanywa site, which contain fingermarked bricks which include rice husks.

Exploration team.

Our exploration team consisted of three researchers from the Department of Archaeology and two Letpanywa village men. There are U Nyein Lwin (research officer), team leader, U Khin Maung Gyi (research assistant grade 2), U Nyi Nyi Than (research assistant grade 4), U Aung Maung (guide) and U Sit Aung (landowner).

Excavation

Two areas of the Oakpho Kone site were excavated (Figure 1), and they are known as LPY 1 and LPY 2. LPY 1 was excavated between January and March 2001. LPY 2 was excavated in June and July of 2002. Time allowed for excavation depended on our departmental budget. The excavation was done on a grid system so that finds could be systematically recorded. Two rectangular brick buildings were found, one with a collapsed megalith (large memorial-type stone) at one end. These buildings had bricks with finger marks and rice husks. There were skeletal burials inside and outside the boundaries of the buildings. Every one was buried with an iron implement, a sword, hammer or spear head. The inclusion of iron as grave goods is a common feature of Pyu burials (ASI 1923-24: 83, 1924-25: 106, 1926-27: 166-167, 1929-30: 156). The finds at the site included earthenware (pottery, terracotta cup, terracotta plate), three gold rings and beads made from terracotta, agate, carnelian and chalcedony. A pot containing the skeletal remains of a 12 month old baby was among the burials. A small bronze sword decoration found along the northeast wall of the more northerly of the two buildings (LPY 2) featured a circle of twelve human faces (Figure 2).

Preliminary interpretation of the site.

The large Pyu cities, which are surrounded by brick walls, are known for their ritual burial structures, brick buildings that in the case of Beikthano have been interpreted as shrines to the city founders or other important groups (Stargardt 1994). Burials at Beikthano are largely, but not exclusively, in pots (Aung Thaw 1968). There are both pot and inhumation burials at Halin (Myint Aung 1970). The finds at Letpanywa show that brick construction and associated ritual activities were not unique to the large, walled central places during the Pyu period.

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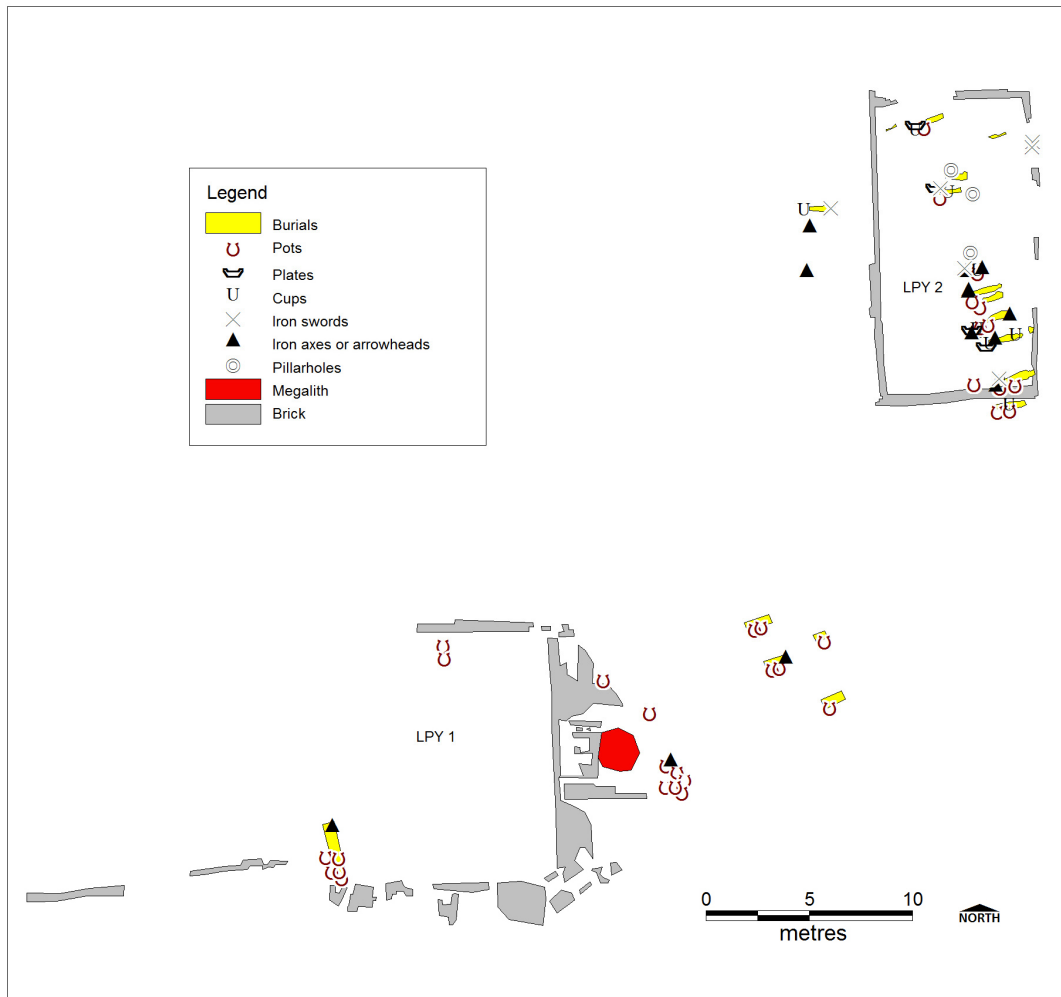


Figure 1 Letpanywa excavation plan.



Figure 2 Sword decoration with human faces (centimetre scale).